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Don’t wait out four hard years: speak truth to power

The importance of diversity in science is an unshakeable reality that the scientific community must stand by.

By Arthur Caplan

“*Eppur si muove*”; “and yet it moves”. These words, supposedly whispered by Galileo Galilei at the end of his 1633 trial — held because he supported the Copernican ‘heresy’ that Earth moves around the Sun — have long been a byword for how scientists should behave in the face of ignorance, intolerance and ideological inerrancy. They come to mind now, during the all-out war on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) happening in the United States.

At the end of his trial, Galileo was made to swear that he did not believe in Earth’s motion. He was confined to house arrest and forbidden to write any more about the movement of the planet. If he had had grant funding and a website, I am sure that the Roman Catholic Church would have suspended the former and scrubbed the latter.

Yet, far from acting in courageous defiance, many scientists and administrators now seem to think that the best response to the war on DEI is to keep their heads low and wait out four hard years.

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Transportation and many prominent universities are among those that have been removing references to DEI from their websites, grants, papers, biographies and even histories.

More scholars must push back. The idea that scientists can keep doing what they know must be done to incorporate DEI into their work while adjusting terms to fit the demands of bigoted autocrats bent on hobbling science is to whistle loudly past a graveyard of avoidable error, continued financial cuts and censorship. That diversity matters to science is a truth — albeit one that has only recently begun to be accepted and applied.

First, clinical and social-science research requires diversity to be valid. Genomics has established that different groups of people respond differently to drugs and vaccines. The individuals recruited to and participating in clinical trials must be representative of those who will use those treatments in real life. Attention to DEI allows researchers to identify differences in safety and efficacy between groups early on in the testing process.

Likewise, social scientists are well aware that understanding behaviour and implementing desired change requires studying populations besides white, Western, university psychology students — the group from which psychologists have mainly sourced participants for decades. This is the case whether researchers seek to overcome vaccine hesitancy, prevent self-harm, improve reading skills, change recycling habits or prevent obesity.

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Second, research has shown again and again that DEI matters when it comes to providing health care. A diverse and representative health-care workforce improves people’s satisfaction with the care

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that they receive and health outcomes, especially for individuals of colour. When Black people are treated by Black doctors, they are more likely to receive the preventive care that they need and more likely to agree to recommended interventions, such as blood tests and flu shots.

A DEI-oriented workforce improves learning and outcomes for all. Many veterans seeking mental-health care or rehabilitation after trauma specifically request a psychologist who is a veteran. Attention to DEI helps to ensure that health-care providers’ opportunities to learn are not missed, and that problems facing rural communities, minority ethnic groups and those with rare diseases are not neglected.

Third, diversity in the scientific workforce brings a multitude of ideas, approaches, perspectives and values to the table. Thinking outside the box matters in tackling all manner of problems in artificial intelligence, engineering, mathematics, economics and astrophysics. Diverse minds can find connections and patterns, provide perspectives and draw conclusions that might not occur to a group of less-inclusive researchers.

Have some of the efforts around DEI been fruitless or wrong-headed? Anyone who has had to sit through hours of under-tested DEI sensitivity ‘training’ created quickly by for-profit companies with little exposure to scientific environments knows that they have been. And DEI has often ended up being a vague term wafted around by overly zealous progressive people with a grudge. But that does not mean that DEI cannot be defined relative to a specific scientific question. Nor does it mean that the importance of DEI can be ignored.

Scientists, their funders and their professional societies must follow in Galileo’s perhaps apocryphal footsteps and speak up about DEI’s crucial role in science. They must urge patient-advocacy organizations, environmentalists and other citizen

groups to declare that they don’t want their or their children’s health and well-being jeopardized by the bad science that a lack of attention to DEI will produce. They must emphasize DEI in their publications whenever the denial of its relevance to a scientific issue is demanded by political inquisitors.

These are dangerous times. Scientists globally must stand together for sound science and resist bigotry, bias and hate. If science is to honour one of its core values — a commitment to the truth wherever it might lead — scientists must stand up when DEI matters. Galileo’s story should remind us all: the only way forward is speaking truth to power.

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